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'Shocking' video shows Michigan prison officers spraying chemicals on handcuffed inmate

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Key Points

- Corrections released the video in 2024 to settle a lawsuit filed by investigative journalist Daniel Moritz-Rabson.
- The Detroit Free Press is publishing the video for the first time.

LANSING — A video of Michigan prison officers in riot gear confronting a caged and handcuffed inmate and twice spraying him with chemical agents has become a central issue in a federal court lawsuit.

The video — which the Detroit Free Press is publishing for the first time — provides the public with a rare glimpse behind prison walls. Michigan Department of Corrections officials routinely deny Freedom of Information Act requests for video records, citing security concerns.

Demetrius Buckley, an award-winning prison writer who was born and raised in Detroit, alleges prison officials retaliated against him in August 2023, for an article he wrote about life at Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, intentionally moving him to a cell

with a violent and mentally ill prisoner who assaulted him, and then spraying him with chemicals while he was handcuffed.

Buckley's suit, filed in April in U.S. District Court in Grand Rapids, alleges retaliation and use of excessive force by prison officials and seeks unspecified damages.

The video — which the MDOC released in 2024 to settle a separate lawsuit brought under the Michigan FOIA — shows officers wearing helmets and breathing masks and carrying shields shouting at Buckley through a prison grate, as he stands in an enclosed prison shower, ordering him to strip completely naked, despite the fact that he is handcuffed. The officers then twice spray Buckley with chemicals as he falls to the floor coughing, repeatedly saying, "I don't understand."

On Oct. 14, U.S. Magistrate Judge Sally Berens ordered, over the objections of lawyers from the Attorney General's Office representing prison officials, that Buckley can file a copy of the video as an exhibit, as a way of bolstering his claims against state efforts to have the lawsuit dismissed. The video was filed with the court Oct. 20, records show.

Buckley, 40, alleges corrections officers at Handlon made comments in August 2023 about having read his just-published article describing prison abuses before another officer said, "Don't worry about it, I've got a spot for you," and moved him to a cell with a prisoner with a known violent history.

One week later, the inmate attacked him in the middle of the night and beat him with a padlock attached to a belt, leaving him with a gash to the head and other injuries, according to the lawsuit.

Officials then falsely accused Buckley of assaulting the cellmate, denied him medical treatment, handcuffed him, moved him to a caged shower, repeatedly ordered him to strip naked, and then, when Buckley did not respond as quickly as ordered, sprayed him with

chemicals before getting him to strip and shower and moving him to solitary confinement, where he spent about 10 days, the suit alleges.

Buckley, who is serving an 18- to 30-year sentence for a 2010 homicide and so far has not been able to view the video himself, told the Free Press in a telephone interview he remains concerned about retaliation and the impact the video will have on his loved ones, but on balance he wants it made public.

"I feel that what happened wasn't right," said Buckley, who, since the incident, has been moved to Cooper Street Correctional Facility near Jackson. "That encourages me to go forward."

Daniel Moritz-Rabson, a New York City investigative reporter who writes about the criminal legal system, sued to obtain the video with the help of the Michigan American Civil Liberties Union. The MDOC typically denies FOIA requests for prison video, saying the release of such images could compromise prison security, and the department made that argument in denying his request, Moritz-Rabson said. But he appealed the denial and then sued in state court. In September 2024, the MDOC agreed to release the video, shot by a prison official with a handheld camera, to settle the lawsuit.

"There is a very good reason why Michigan did not want to release the video," but it did not relate to compromising prison security, said Moritz-Rabson. He said he did not publish the video when he obtained it because of privacy and security concerns initially expressed by Buckley, who views the situation differently one year later. The video "pulled back the veil" on violence incarcerated people in Michigan and elsewhere in the United States are subjected to daily, Moritz-Rabson said.

Jenni Riehle, a spokeswoman for the MDOC, declined to comment, citing pending litigation. She would not identify the brownish-orange chemical used on Buckley, which the lawsuit identifies as pepper spray.

But in a July court filing, attorneys for the department argued Buckley's suit should be dismissed because it does not meet several legal requirements. For example, Buckley has not demonstrated that the officers he is suing had knowledge of the article titled, "Walking on eggshells: The abuse of power and authority in prisons," published by the nonprofit news outlet Prism, the court filing said.

In an Aug. 21 court filing, Assistant Attorney General Christopher Alex said that if Buckley was going to file the video as an exhibit, he should have done so when he first filed his complaint. Court rules don't allow plaintiffs to submit additional evidence to counter a motion to dismiss, Alex said.

But Berens ruled otherwise.

Nick Roumel, an Ann Arbor civil rights attorney representing Buckley, said Buckley had a target put on his back because of what he had the courage to write, and that is egregious.

When Roumel viewed the video, "the contrast between his naked, handcuffed, defenseless form and these people in this paramilitary garb was just shocking to me," he said.

Buckley told the Free Press in a series of telephone interviews he was interested in writing at an early age and began writing poems and short stories when he attended Farwell Middle School in Detroit.

Since he was sent to prison 15 years ago, Buckley's work has appeared in U-M's Michigan Quarterly Review, The Marshall Project, and Scalawag, among other publications. In 2021, his poetry "Letters from Daddy" won the Page Davidson Clayton Prize for Emerging Poets.

Though his August 2023 article in Prism didn't identify any corrections officers by name, it included Buckley's description of the behavior of certain officers as "power-drunk."

The lawsuit alleges that the day after the article was published, officers unexpectedly moved Buckley from his cell in a unit for inmates who were attending college to a unit prisoners

nicknamed "the 'hood," with a new cellmate.

The suit alleges that Buckley complained to officers after being struck while sleeping several times in the first few nights, but one officer said he wasn't going to be relocated and another said he didn't care if Buckley was killed. The assault with the padlock happened one week after Buckley was moved to the cell, the suit alleges.

"They said I hit him," Buckley told the Free Press, adding that he felt lightheaded and doesn't have a clear memory of the series of events recorded in the video.

Moritz-Rabson said he learned about what happened to Buckley as a member of the Empowerment Avenue collective that works with Buckley and other prison writers.

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